

Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari - Between Ignorance and Extremism



Alhamdulillah rabbi al-alamin, wa salatu wa salamu 'ala sayyidina al-mursalin, wa 'ala alihi, wa ashabihi ajma'in.

Brother Chair, Shaykhs, brothers, sisters, *Al salamu 'Alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barkatuhu*. It's a pleasure and a privilege to be here, Alhamdulillah.

Now the topic is interesting and important especially in the present day and time, especially in this country. We hear about extremism a lot and when we hear about extremism, generally it means, especially in the wider media, about the Muslim community, about Muslim youth. Is it the reality? These are the issues that need lots of discussion. Now the topic is between ignorance and extremism. Is ignorance bliss? That's an English expression, "ignorance is bliss." Is it blissful? Sometimes maybe it is, occasionally, but not always. If you are a driver and you want to drive in a place where there are no signs, can you drive? And if the police catch you and you say, "I don't know," - that ignorance is probably not going to be accepted.

In the same way, Islam means peace; Islam means moderation. What does Islam bring to us, to the Muslims, and to the rest of humanity? If someone says, "I don't know anything about Islam," that ignorance is nothing but destruction, destruction on this earth and in the hereafter. So ignorance is never bliss for a Muslim. The Prophet (s.a.w.s.) has categorically mentioned on many occasions the importance of an 'alim over an 'abid. 'Alim means the one who practices religion on the basis of knowledge and understanding, and 'abid is who simply practices. There are many important ahadith about that. The Prophet (s.a.w.s.) once mentioned that the comparison between an 'alim and an 'abid is like me and an ordinary Muslim.

Compared to an ordinary Muslim, the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) is far superior. So an 'alim is far more superior to an 'abid.

Now, this issue of extremism is very much linked with ignorance, although the Western media tries to play it off. Although we saw the media this last summer tackling extremism (and by extremism the government meant extremism within the Muslim community), but we know there is extremism in other communities, too, and that has been not only extremism, but also violent extremism in many communities. Even in the history of Europe, for the last few centuries, what happened to the Jews of the 1930s and 1940s? What happened to the different communities in Bosnia? Muslims were butchered in three days. 7-8,000 Muslims are butchered. This is genocide, and genocide is the extension of extremism when it comes to Europe. So, extremism is not a monopoly for the Muslims, it's for all the communities, but the media sometimes, in fact, always the far right media, tries to promote that extremism is only related to the Muslims. In fact, it's our fault as well. We don't reach out to the wider society. We are such a type of Muslims, only probably ghettoized within our own boundaries. We are within our own boxes. We don't reach out, so that's one of the main reasons for this misinformation, for this lack of information.

Who are Muslims? Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala mentions about Muslims that they are the community of the middle path. "wa kazalika ja'alnakum ummatan wasata li takunu shuhada ala al-nas, wa yakunu rasulu alaykum shahida." The Muslim community has been created as the ummatan wasata, that means the community of the middle path. Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala says "la taghlu fi dinikum," that there is no extremism in the religion, and the Prophet's (s.a.w.s.) life and companions' lives are the manifestation of lives of moderation.

Some people may understand something different about moderation. Moderation is not apologetic. Moderation is not accepting the untruth, wrong belief, and accommodating everything. Moderation is something that is in human nature, something that means you will take the middle path when it comes to two extremes. One extreme on the one side is rigidity, fanaticism, and radicalism. On the other hand, there could be libertarian attitude, laxity, or so-called liberalism. Both of them are two extremes, and we have to take the middle path, the path that Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala has given us.

You know the story of three companions of the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) that came and discussed. One of them said he would never stop fasting; he would be fasting forever, as long as he lives. One of them said he will be praying for the whole night. One of them said that he will never go to his wife. The Prophet (s.a.w.s.) came and heard that. He asked, "Did you say this?" and they said, "Yeah, Rasul Allah we said that." Then the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) said, "I am the example. I fast and I don't fast. I pray.

Sometimes I take rest, and I have wives.” Then they said, “Ya Rasul Allah, you are a Rasul so your past and future sins are forgiven, but we are just common human beings.” (You see, even then they were arguing.) So what it means is extremism is, in fact, in our nature to some degree. We all sometimes become extreme in our opinions. Sometimes we’re emotional; sometimes, relaxed. It’s in human nature that human beings occasionally become extreme, occasionally become liberal. It’s the nature, the fitrah, of the human being. But our actions and continuous thought processes needs to guide us so that we don’t follow either the right extreme or the left extreme.

Now, what are the reasons for this extremism? One of the basic and fundamental reasons is a lack of knowledge and understanding. That’s what the topic is: Ignorance. The second reason could be lack of proper thinking. Unfortunately, Muslims should have continued to be a thinking nation. Muslims were a thinking nation, and that’s why they had been superior in terms of education and technology. Muslims had created a civilization on the basis of knowledge and ijihad. But nowadays, Muslims simply work. We have produced many workers, but very few thinkers. Another reason could be a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability. When people are bullied, they are insecure. Sometimes they become the bully themselves. So insecurity could be one of the main reasons for extremism.

And also another fitrah, another nature, is our hastiness, especially among the young generation. You remember that people, especially in their young days, are idealistic and want to get things very easily and immediately. “Khuliqa al-insana azula.” Human beings are people who have haste. We want to get things easily, by shortcut. The manifestation could be bigotry, acting holier than thou, “I am better than you, I am more pious than you.” People don’t say this, but it is as if the expression is I am better than you, more pious than you. In manners, that’s manifested in their behaviour, and also in suspicion. They always find conspiracy everywhere. They suspect everyone, Muslims, non-Muslims. The Prophet (s.a.w.s.) says, “yassiru wa la tu’assiru.” Make things easier for yourself; don’t make things difficult for yourself. “Bashiru wa la tunafiru” Give glad tidings, do not give the messages of doom, and hopelessness.

So I think these are a few of my thoughts and reflections, brothers and sisters. Towards the end, just an apology that I might have to leave some time in the middle because tomorrow as you probably know, there is the massive rally in Trafalgar Square and hopefully many of you, inshallah, will be attending that. And that’s a different discussion, but tomorrow 1:00pm Trafalgar Square. So with these few words, I leave you in the hands of two very great scholars of our times, alhamdulillah. May Allah (swt) help us, help the organizers, Jazakum Allahu Khair for inviting me, Jazakallahu Khair brothers and sisters for listening to me.

Transcribed by Amina Nawaz. Edited by Karen Nooruddin.